

Op-ed Warning the Public

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What will it take to get you to evacuate a building during a fire, run to higher ground because of a tsunami or volcanic lahar, or “shelter-in-place” because a toxic substance is floating in the air outside your home?

The answer is not as easy as it might seem at first glance. Countless studies show that even when people are directly warned of a danger, many seek a secondary verification of the threat that is perhaps only minutes away from killing them. When seconds count, do you need to smell smoke before you believe the fire alarm?

The recent tsunami warning for the Washington coast that petered out into just a bulletin, and a wave height that was measured in inches, not feet is the most recent example of the complexity we have in determining when to pull the trigger on a warning and trying to judge what people will do in response.

As an emergency manager I know that the easiest way to be fired is to be blamed for a “failure to warn the public.” Experience is a wonderful teacher and I had a very real life lesson when the last tsunami warning was issued about ten or eleven years ago. I was the Operations Unit Manager at the State’s Emergency Operations Center when a Tsunami Warning was issued by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center. This warning was passed down to coastal counties so that they could take appropriate action to evacuate people at risk along the coast.

After doing the initial warning we started checking with coastal counties on the status of their evacuations. We discovered that some counties had not taken any action to warn their citizens (sound familiar?). I immediately got this hollow feeling in my gut, thinking of the ramifications of a failure to act. I immediately initiated actions to issue an Emergency Alert System (EAS) Warning to the public using commercial television and radio to issue the warning. Before the EAS message could be sent the Tsunami Warning was cancelled.

Since that time, I’ve resolved that if I’m going to be fired, it will be for doing something that I believe can save lives, and not for a failure to act. I’m not too sure this was the same lesson learned by the public officials who failed to take action to warn their citizens last week or even ten years ago. It may be that by dilly-dallying around they were awarded with a cancelled warning and “a no harm done.” I’m reminded of the Thailand official who did not issue a tsunami warning because it might hurt tourism.

To those public safety and elected officials who understand the threat of a tsunami to their community, a situation where seconds count, and who followed their emergency procedures to warn their citizens—I say “well done” you did the right thing!

The average person also has to be ready for the next warning. Understand the hazards that you face at home, work, and schools. Forewarned is forearmed. Knowing the hazards allows you to create a plan, establish a disaster kit and get training.

As Americans we seem to have a low tolerance for mistakes that cause an inconvenience to us, such as making us miss our favorite program on television that night. It is a small price to pay for participating in a real life drill that may save you or your children’s lives in the future—because they’ll remember the right way to respond to a warning!